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These poems explore, in part, female identity and sexuality. Often, they seek to understand and expose the ways in which the female body is subjected to violence, whether that violence is physical or emotional, public or private, literal or figurative.

LAST NIGHT, THE MAGNOLIA TREE

by

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Last night, the magnolia tree
winked its pink lids outside
my window. My eyes
scanned your body, rib by rib,
counting each careful diamond
of skin on your palm, each
ridged fingertip, how your face
is a frame for your mouth—

This morning, when I open
my mouth in the shower,
you are the water. When I step
into my clothes, I am moving
toward you. When I answer
the telephone, I imitate
your laughter. I am still trying
to form words like *yes,*
every piece, all—

Later, my legs will grow
thick with root; my fingers
will swell and bloom. I will stomp
through your kitchen bare-
foot, rattling the glass
in the cabinets.

I.

Storm Cellar

What I wanted was not
what I wanted: syllables

burnt down like cigarettes,
the bar counter

slick with spills
and shellac, too smooth

to catch me. What is,
what was: a pulsing

hot blood star:
the neon draught

sign blinking
on and off, the sticks

under our feet, the sticks
against my back,

a door swinging
shut above me.

What I know
of a man: his hands:

my mother drew
me a map

I couldn't read.
She didn't say

sometimes what
they hold they hold

too tight:
the next morning,

I washed my hair
in the sink, the stink

of damp still clinging
to my wrinkled dress.

On the Nod

Like dogs, way back behind the lot, we slip
in and out of sun, we keep the belt
clenched in our jaws, we wait. There's trouble here,
there's trouble in the bricks, the backseat, slouching
in the bathroom sink. But we're on the nod, we're in
the sweating jungle of a dream: The tangled
human knot that held us back is gone.
The truth's behind us like our thinning shirts
and hair, the drop of blood that siphons up
black tar: What you can't face, we tuck into
our veins, forget. So call us dregs, say what
will let you sleep at night: Swallow our names
like we are no one's sons or daughters, cold
as the night we melted through the door like ghosts.

Hide & Seek

I found it
on the needle
of a record
player purring, or

I found it
at the bottom
of an apple
sauce jar, or

I found it carved
on the edge
of your house
key like a skyline, or

I found it tied
to a string of bones, or

I found it
on the lip of the lake,
pulling the linen dress
over my head—

I found it
while you were napping
and I could not know
enough about
you or how
you breathe.

Ellen

Sallie Ellen Ionesco, the first person in the United States to undergo transorbital lobotomy, 1946, age 29

A taut cord
that slackens.

A coin circling
slow on its edge,

its edge
a tiny carousel.

A sick tree
hollowed out,

filled with cement.
The cracked bowl

on the mantle.
Every sly smile

uncoiling. No more
crossword puzzles,

no more novels.
No more men

in the rafters
where they hid

their microphones.
More sex,

no more dinner
parties. My tongue

sharper, my wit
duller:

A spitting kettle
pulled from the burner

quiets so quickly.

Bizzy

Baby sister walking down Rue Jean Juarès:
When we were teenagers, you stole my packs
of cigarettes and hid them

under your mattress, then cried when I found
them stashed and screamed at you. Forgive me
those days spent hissing

through the house; love me just as you did
back then, protecting me when I should have been
protecting you.

Baby sister walking down Rue Jean Juarès:
you were always beautiful and you knew it—
we were both pretty

in those days. But remember how I envied
your flat brown stomach through the summers?
Bizzy, I've heard

it isn't safe for American girls there.
Baby sister walking down Rue Jean Juarès,
living now in Avignon,

twenty-one years old but still my baby
sister on the sidewalk moving, swinging
bags of groceries:

A man followed you home from the train,
he waited. In college, I knew a bartender.
I said no

but he heard yes. So what truth is there
to tell you, Bizzy? And what good would it do
now? You, walking,

and me, helpless. You tell me how he snuck
through the cracked apartment door, how
you couldn't scream

until he touched you. There are no words for you,
baby sister walking down Rue Jean Juarès,
it's all been said

before. Now you are across an ocean, a crackling
voice through a receiver. *How could I be*
so stupid? you ask

over and over, rocking. Bizzy, I would
take it back—throw that pack of cigarettes
away, leave

that bar and not come back. Even though
I never told you, it still happened.
Forgive me. I would

strangle that man if I could—gouge
his eyes out—but what good would it do
now? Nothing

could mean what you mean to me
or say what I want to say to you here:
Forgive me, I would.

Piano Lessons

He never touched me, it wasn't—
It was just the too-long hugs, the way
I knew he wanted to feel my back
through my clothes when he patted me
while I played, the way he said hello
and goodbye with his hands, how
he acted differently when my mother
was in the room. I didn't tell my parents
then. I didn't tell them how he rocked
on the stool next to me, his eyes closed—
Play play—his hands moving rhythmically,
knee to thigh, knee to thigh. Mr. G.
was always kind to me. He never—
The studio was in the garage
behind his house, three rooms
separated by doors: the waiting room
with a green vinyl couch and a black-
and-white TV; the office where he took
my parents' checks; and the red-
carpeted piano room with paneled
walls. One day, he pulled a metal box
from inside a drawer, he said
his brother used to be a jeweler,
he just had this lying around—
He wanted me to wear the necklace.
The door was shut, he'd shut it.
I asked my sister, he never gave her
anything—so I showed it to my mother.
She wanted to know, so I told her
the truth: *no ma'am— just the necklace—*
he never—just— until I begged her
not to tell him that I'd told,

just to sit with me during the lessons
so I wouldn't be alone. She told me
I imagined things. Next week
at my lesson, Mr. G. smiled so big
that his teeth were like those piano
keys, and he laughed—he pinched my sides
while he was laughing—and I knew
that Mom had told him, that he'd made her
laugh with him, laugh at me. It was three
years of lessons before she'd let me quit.
And Mr. G. still visits on Christmas
and on Thanksgiving— He brings his Polaroid
camera— He wants to take my picture.

The Lobotomist

Dr. Walter Freeman

I arrived at St. E's during a heat wave—
it was the summer of '24—
to writhing bodies sobbing, shrieking,
huddled naked on the floor.

I worked. I thought of my three babies, my wife,
her belly quickening.
In the basement morgue, I dissected brains
searching for a lesion, a tumor, a thickening.

My grandfather performed his famous surgeries
before awe-struck crowds;
when I pulled that first pick from the icebox,
I said his name aloud.

What you don't understand is the sound: grown men
howling, rubbing shit on the walls—some
violent, most too agitated to eat, wash, dress.
What I did sent them home.

I held their sighing faces in my hands, then slipped
the pick behind their eyes.
What you don't understand: their families thanked me,
they held me, they cried.

II.

Backseat Ghazal

for my mother

In Long Branch, the oak trees stand as still as stones:
In this backyard made of dust, you swallowed stones.

An airplane taking off, a Springsteen song—
your tweed skirt, how you held your mouth: a stone.

In my dream you are a little girl, no more than ten.
You knock on neighbors' doors and beg for stones.

Your mother ran for a neighbor's phone. From the backseat
you watched his heart turn flesh, turn stone.

He died in the Buick, that boat floating you to seder—
the first night of Chanukah—no miracles: just stones.

On vacation, you never wear your bathing suit:
You walk the shore in jeans, collecting stones.

Sand in your maryjanes, pine-branch wheeling—fifteen,
you buried your pain in the earth like a stone.

Eight years ago, I visited that beach, I tried to understand:
I pretended I was you and *sea* was *stone*.

The salt hangs low: You want to speak, but Mom
that kaddish is stuck in your throat like a stone.

Amish Country

Summers, we'd watch the women walking
in their long dresses, their hair tucked
under white caps that looked like coffee
filters, the men chewing tobacco and patting
the twitching necks of their horses.
They were our neighbors; I read
about them at school: Sometimes, I'd imagine
their unlit kitchens and bedrooms,
the places we couldn't see
from the road, and I'd think of what
it might be like to live without telephones—
like camping. They interested me only
in the most sensational way:
I did not imagine *them*, but rather
myself *being* them. My teachers said
the Amish hated to have their pictures
taken because they thought the cameras
would swallow their souls. When I saw
the shooting on the news, I was in college.
I spent hours some evenings before
I went out, changing my outfits, brushing
on mascara. My parents taught me
never talk to men I don't know, don't
smile at strangers, always walk home
with friends. I knew what trust meant,
I knew what lived outside my apartment—
What did they know? The shooter
left four suicide notes, one for his wife
and each of his three kids. To the schoolhouse,
he brought KY jelly, four guns, six hundred rounds
of ammunition, and a box of tools. He shot
ten little girls in the back of the head,

who knows what else. I cried
when I read the ticker, listened
to the reporter give the news,
and I couldn't look away from the pictures
of them, the aerial footage
of plain women weeping in the fields.
Before that day, they were not people
so much as straw hats and quilts, jars
of peaches and rhubarb, cedar rocking chairs,
a skeletal barn somewhere off the highway.
Every morning, I rouge my cheeks,
I pull on short skirts—I know about sex
and guns, I know what men want—
ten little girls in the back of the head,
and their mothers were stalked by helicopters.
Yet still their grandfathers said
We must not think evil of this man;
whole families prayed for him, sent
condolences to his wife. The Amish
hate to be photographed because they know
pride is a sin, because they make
their lives from humility, because
they don't want to do what brings attention
to themselves. What does forgiveness
mean to me, who have I ever
really forgiven? These people
are blips on my television, shadows
on the side of the road. I hate that man,
but it's not my place to hate him,
and I don't believe in God—
but if he weren't dead
I'd wish him dead, I'd hope
he suffered. What
does that make me?

Falling Down

My skeleton is not hollow
like a bird's, it is marrowed
with the full ring of your laughter,
the slender give of your skin. I sink
like a wrench in a swimming pool
until I hit the soft ground
of your breasts and arms,
which will build the earth
that cups me, and when I reach
that warm place, I rise
like an anemic drop of blood
in sugar water, the test that proves
no one else can use my body.

Rosemary

for Rosemary Kennedy, lobotomized age 23

Little Rosie rolling through the field,
half-dazed: When you spoke,
you spoke out of turn; you rode
in that boy's car; you broke
out of the convent on a rope
of knotted sheets. You were not
your precious, golden brothers,
nor placid, nor sweet. You roared
through that house, you hissed
at your mother. There was no place
for you, though they loved you,
there was no place for a woman
so dumb and so fierce. Desperation
led them to the Doctor's office,
desperation and the misplaced hope
of who you were meant to be, quiet and kind,
your brothers' keeper, the oldest sister,
darling and upright. When the surgeon
pierced your skull, you were wide awake.
Know this: They did not know.
But then all you had was the dull snap
of those synapses breaking and
the boldness of your body, stripped
of language, stripped of reason,
still bulging awake each morning.
And all they had was the greatness
of your need. You were the first
Tragedy, Rosie, but know
that you were not the last. And know
that your sisters huddled by,
that Eunice visited once a month

in her elaborate hats and her small,
latticed gloves to read you passages
from the Bible.

Nana

Six, maybe, I watched you
undress in your bedroom,
stepping out of your yellow-
gray slip, bent in half:
creased, white stomach,
parabolic spine dotted
with pale marbles,
thick-strapped bra,
rippled breasts. You
hurried, modest but not
wanting to leave me alone
while you slid
into your polyester slacks—
play clothes, you called them.
I wondered at your body,
thinking of my own
and of my mother's. I loved
them, I wanted mine
to grow faster. And after
you were dressed, you pulled
me on a trashcan lid
through the packed snow
on the driveway.

Today, you sip your whiskey
sour, recalling how you
changed our diapers,
danced the Macarena,
and rode *The Sky Princess*
at Dutch Wonderland.
You are proud. Your fingers
drift down your neck

as you speak, then halt
when they reach your collar-
bone, just above the road-
map of scars. It was weeks
before you'd return
to your dinner dances,
ashamed. And those doctors
thought you were lucky,
those doctors thought
an old lady wouldn't
be embarrassed, didn't need
to fill out a dress.

The Televangelist's Wife

I thought that was love—what he crafted
each Sunday in front of the congregation.
I told myself I am the snake, he bites softly
into the red skin of my body:
A man of God does not insist on flesh.
Twice a week, twice a week after twenty
years. I smelled it on him when he came
home, when he was on top of me,
his mouth clicking, eyes like black
marbles—but I could not believe it then.
I could not have cast the Devil Himself
out of my bed. When the newspapers called,
he told me how he had measured the rope, how
he had arranged and rearranged the chair.
I once counseled an eager young man
in our parish and I got so close to him
that I could smell his pristine, cologned neck—
but I thought of our children, I pictured
their five little faces lined up like cabbages:
A woman knows that sacrifice is survival.
My husband had his chance to die. I have
wished, some days, that he had done it
to save me this. There is no shame
like my shame, no bed like my bed
on fire.

III.

Avignon

A boy is taught:
See only what

you want, know only
how to get it.

My sister's body
was as bright

as a star, as long
as a river. At night,

I hear the nervous
tick of her heels,

the frantic tinny click
of her key in the door:

something breaks
in a woman's mind

when *power*
equals *touch.*

My mother cries,
my father says

a lesson learned.
All over the city,

women sleep

in their sneakers,

count their own bones.

Dr. Watts Leaves the Practice

It's true. At first,
when I cradled
their heads in my hands,

I felt nothing. I saw only
their anatomies: hideous, coiled
hair, thick lines of saliva

charting their jaws—
Imagine: their distraught
clean-cut sisters weeping

in the next room.
Their faces were a puzzle
I believed we could solve.

What will I tell my son?
In his life, a man
makes mistakes. One day,

I found Freeman
in the office we shared,
leaning one of them back

in a chair. He was hammering
two picks at once, one
in each socket. And when

he saw me, he smiled,
he said his hands were full—
he wanted me to take his picture

for the paper. He called this
the future of medicine.
I said nothing, shut

the door behind me.
I tell you: I have prayed:
Pray for me:

I cleaned out my desk
that evening.

Stigmatic

Here my palm:
a red blossom:
take it. I have
no husband.
I have seen Him
alive and dead:
He haunts me:
nine lashes
down my back. I live
by visions: I eat
no food but take
the Eucharist. Good
Fridays my feet
are dripping ghosts:
I am a woman:
this is why
no one believes
me. Here my cuts
as fine as lace:
take them. We are not
our bodies:
I dress in thorns.
Here count my ribs:
my bright tears:
I am His servant
I am. Only a woman
is so loved.
I spent years
in bed
slit to bone
and blinded
until He took it:

Here: my palm:
a red blossom:
I do not touch
my body.

The Girls' Locker Room, Eighth Grade

After swimming class,
Katrina held the lighter
at arm's length, flicked it
with her thumb, and let its flame
lick the tip of a safety
pin.

She was one of the girls
who rotated the nozzle
of the dryer to blow out
her black hair
before getting dressed.
Even at 13, she wore
small-cupped, neon bras
under ribbed, white shirts;
she rode in cars
with high school boys.

She wasn't in my classes,
just gym, but I wanted her,
I wanted to be her—
we all did. Years later,
after graduation, she rented
a house with her friends
in Wildwood. She drank
Absolut and snorted cocaine
until she collapsed,
but her boyfriend was scared
of getting caught,
so he dragged her body
to the neighbor's curb,
then called the police

from a payphone.

That day in the locker room,
her brown stomach sheened
like pavement after rain.
I watched her tuck her chin
to her sternum and pull
the skin taut with one hand.
With the other, she pushed
the needled point through,
the pin poised between two fingers.
Katrina: unflinching,
unnervous. She laughed
as her newly-pierced navel
let a single, bright
red drop.

August Ghazal

We roll through the night, through black matchstick trees.
Your beat-up Maxima climbs faster and faster.

You paid for me at restaurants, left your fingerprints
on my elbow. When I laughed and ran ahead, you ran faster.

You smoked out of windows, off balconies,
on curbsides—just outside my door, breathing faster.

When we walk the field, we feel the spiders below us;
blood fills my cheeks, pumps faster and faster.

Lime juice stung the cuts in my fingers:
I sipped the whiskey, you poured it faster.

If the dress was short, I meant it. I dream of vampires.
The only word I can make out: their lips mouthing *faster*.

I am what I gave you; you are what you took.
Rachel, wake up now: the sun's rising faster.

Schizophrenic's Daughter

> *Incredible as it may seem, in most instances [transorbital lobotomy] patients could go home within an hour, usually wearing sunglasses to conceal their "black eyes."—Anne Harrington*, So Human A Brain

From the next room, we heard no cries,
no scream, no gruesome pop.
Mama came out with two black eyes.

When her voices started, I was five.
All affection stopped.
From her bedroom, she heard no cries,

not the baby's, not Dad's, not mine.
She didn't bathe, cook, shop,
just screamed and stared with cold, blue eyes.

She saw Freeman in July;
Dad said that he could make it stop.
From the next room, we heard no cries.

I was a child. How could I have realized—?
After that, things looked up;
we took her home with two black eyes,

quiet, calm. My father made a choice.
The choice was cruel. He's not.
From the next room, I heard no cries:
Mama came out with two black eyes.

Half-Moon Scars

for W.

The half-moon scars around your clavicle are waxing open,
exposing arteries, veins, capillaries—the smallest cell your body makes

I can see, because I can see everything tonight in your face,
in the dark lashes that quiver awake: the way you sound your pleasure

and the way I understand it, the way you hate to be alone
the same way I hate to be alone, the way you have balanced

your life on matchbooks and glass splinters, tip the bourbon bottle,
the way your yellow hips are their own skeleton. I see these things

as clearly as I see the purple-gray sheets or the pillowcases,
which are monogrammed with a name that used to be yours,

but I call you something different, I call you what you say to call you,
and you call me a biblical name, a primordial name, a name that opens

a closed umbrella inside of me, forcing the bones and skin
to rearrange my body into something I thought I could never become,

something that reminds me I was afraid to write this for you,
I was afraid to use our language because it was ours, I was afraid

because it would make me cry, because it would make me laugh—
because it's dark under the blanket but the light touches us everywhere.

Spider Girl, Green Car

After Helen Levitt's photograph "Untitled, New York (spider girl, green car), 1980"

A little girl leans, backward crab-walking
against the panel of a stem-colored Pontiac,
craning her neck toward her own reflection
in the hubcap. She is pushing herself
off the curb by her black maryjanes, pressing
one hypotonic hand against the body
of the car to perch herself above
a moat of rainwater. *Spider girl*, Levitt calls her,
for the way she curls to find the wheel,
her face obscured by black hair
and shadow so that it's impossible to know
if she's pleased or disappointed, if she loves
what she sees, if she even recognizes it.
My first night in that place, the doctor lined
the walls with paper, she made me draw
myself, then press my body
against the outline: So of course
what I *imagined* my body to look like
was not what my body *actually* looked like,
but what girl hasn't learned all that
one way or another, what woman
takes a shower without trying not to look
down? Now, the girl in the photograph
would be older than I am, but here
she is eight, she is nine, she hasn't learned
what it means to *look* at someone,
to be looked at, to feel each cell blossom,
then betray her. What do I see in her
and what have I imagined?: her face buried
behind her knee, the veil of dirt
around her body, a halo, garbage

floating down the street like
newspaper boats. Suddenly I think
of the daughter I might never have,
don't want to have, the daughter I spun back
into my body when I learned
what having a body meant. She is
so small, so thin and dark
and small, impoverished
body reading itself in the hubcap
of a 1972 Pontiac Ventura. My daughter,
what would I tell her? Someday
you will understand what it means
to be defined by lack. Don't read magazines,
stop looking into hubcaps, get off
that street corner, get out
of that oil-stained road—if I could
I would take you—if I could I would
tell you there are things
no one should ask for.

NOTES

Ellen: Sallie Ellen Ionesco (Ellen to her friends and family) was the first patient in the United States to undergo transorbital lobotomy.

Before Ellen, the lobotomies Dr. Walter Freeman (see notes for "The Lobotomist") performed were highly invasive, required a sterile surgical area, and could take hours to complete. For many years, Freeman wished to develop a less involved, faster procedure that could reach more patients. This is what led him to conceive the transorbital lobotomy. His new lobotomy took less than fifteen minutes, could be performed by anyone, and did not require a sterile environment or the oversight of a surgeon. The patient was given a strong electroshock to render her unconscious, and then a long, sharp tool was inserted into the eye socket from behind the eyelid. With a few taps of the hammer and a sweeping motion of the wrist, the nerve endings at the front of the frontal lobe were severed.

Freeman introduced the transorbital lobotomy in 1946; before his death in 1972, he would personally perform nearly 3,500 such lobotomies.

Ellen was Freeman's first transorbital lobotomy patient. At 29, she was a housewife and young mother. Before the procedure, she was reported to suffer from suicidal ideations and paranoid delusions. After the procedure, Ellen was childlike—she could communicate and care for some of her own basic needs but had trouble making decisions and was uninhibited. However, her suicidal tendencies and delusions were reported to stop. Her family spoke out in support of the surgery. Ellen's lobotomy was considered a major success and paved the way for transorbital lobotomies to become popular in American psychiatry.

The Lobotomist: Dr. Walter Freeman was the neurologist responsible for developing the lobotomy as a treatment for mental illness in the United States. He began his career working at St. Elizabeth's—often referred to as St. E's—a psychiatric hospital in Washington, DC. In the 1930s, he teamed with surgeon James W. Watts and began performing prefrontal lobotomies, accessing the brain through the skull at the top of the head. Then, in the 1940s, he developed the transorbital or "ice pick" lobotomy (see notes for "Ellen"). It is rumored

that the original tool used for the first transorbital lobotomies was literally an ice pick from Freeman's home. Although Freeman initially intended lobotomy to be used only in severe cases, he became obsessed with the procedure and believed it to be the future of psychiatric medicine—and the future of his own fame and reputation.

Freeman's father was a successful physician, and his grandfather, William Keen, was a famous neurosurgeon and one-time President of the American Medical Association who performed the first successful surgery to remove a brain tumor. Keen was also an infamous showman who liked to perform his surgeries before a crowded operating theater.

Rosemary: Rosemary Kennedy was among the first women in the United States to undergo prefrontal lobotomy before the introduction of the new, less invasive transorbital lobotomy procedure in 1946 (see notes for "Ellen.") The earliest lobotomies like the one Rosemary had involved drilling holes in the skull and using a long spoon-like tool to remove corings of the frontal lobe. Before the development of Thorazine, the first antipsychotic drug, in the early 1950s, many institutionalized patients were considered untreatable except by lobotomy.

Rosemary's lobotomy marked an important turning point in the history of psychosurgery: Freeman wanted to take lobotomy to un-institutionalized patients. Rosemary did not suffer from psychosis, and she did not pose any physical threat. Her father brought her to Freeman because he had become frustrated with her defiant adolescent behavior and with her disinterest in fulfilling the Kennedy legacy.

There is much debate over Rosemary's IQ before the lobotomy; although she had been assessed as having moderate retardation, many physicians and historians now speculate it was more likely she suffered from depression or bipolar disorder or simply refused to participate actively in her IQ tests. Her journals demonstrate a normal range of linguistic and analytical skills. Regardless, her rebellious behavior, in Freeman's opinion, justified the procedure.

The outcome of Rosemary's lobotomy was particularly devastating, especially considering her high level of functioning before the procedure; for the rest of her life (she died in 2005 at the age of 86), she was incontinent, her speech was unintelligible, and she slipped in and out of catatonia. The Kennedys—in particular her father—concealed the

lobotomy for decades to protect the family's reputation, claiming that she was born with her mental disability, a myth that persists today.

Dr. Watts Leaves the Practice: James W. Watts was a surgeon who was involved with Freeman at the beginning of his career at St. Elizabeth's. Freeman needed Watts' expertise during the early prefrontal lobotomy procedures (see notes for "Rosemary.") Watts initially supported Freeman's experiments with lobotomy and saw it as a viable option in the most severe cases; however, as Freeman's definition of mental illness expanded to include more and more patients, and as he developed his own "ice pick" procedure without Watts' knowledge, Watts came to doubt the legitimacy of lobotomy as a medical treatment, left practice with Freeman, and later spoke out against his former colleague.

Schizophrenic's Daughter: This poem is loosely based on Ellen Ionesco's daughter, Angelene Forester, who continues to speak out in defense of the procedure her mother underwent more than 60 years ago. In an interview with the National Public Radio program *Talk of the Nation* originally aired on November 16, 2005, Forester says this about her mother's condition after the lobotomy:

> She was absolutely violently suicidal beforehand. After the transorbital lobotomy, there was nothing. It stopped immediately. It was just peace. I don't know how to explain it to you.

Forester has also spoken out about Freeman. During the same interview, she says:

> I remember sitting on his lap and his beard was pointed and it was very soft. As a child you kind of see into people's souls and he was good, at least then. I don't know what happened after that. I wish he hadn't gotten quite so out of hand.